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Faidley is America's top storm

s living shooting the breeze

Photos by Kelly Presnell / Arizona Daily Star

By Gerald M. Gay

Warren Faidley looks to the heavens with steely determination as a thick soup of thunderheads blankets the evening sky.

Parked on an open patch of Marana desert just east of Interstate 10, the nationally known storm chaser scans the area for activity. The muted growl of traffic hums behind him as bats flap overhead and a steady wind blusters through, rattling the nearby mesquite trees.

Faidley makes his living from extreme weather. For more than two decades, the photojournalist has built a stock footage empire by covering some of the country's biggest hurricanes, tornados, floods and fires.

But Mother Nature is a fickle mistress. Sometimes, she just won't cooperate.

"It is like a game of chess trying to figure out which way to go," says Faidley, the brim of his Indiana Jones-style fedora shadowing his brow. "You can see no lightning at all. Then all of a sudden, Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!"

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Aside from a few sunset shots, the evening is a bust. Faidley says that is not uncommon.

He's risked his life more than once in his 22 years on the job. Baseball-size hail has pummeled his car, and tornados have come dangerously close to ending him.

But those moments can be few and far between. For Faidley, it's the thrill of the hunt that makes the catch worthwhile.

"It is a reward and punishment system," he says. "You just have to have patience."

Faidley was fascinated with extreme weather even as a boy growing up in Tucson.

He was 10 when his family moved to the Old Pueblo from Mobile, Ala. His dad was a computer

programmer recruited to work as a civilian technician at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base.

Faidley lived in the Lakeside Park neighborhood on Tucson's east side and went to Santa Rita High School.

He spent his summers watching the heavy rains and monsoon floods and he loved a good dust devil.

"Warren was always an intense kid," said Faidley's dad, Warren Faidley Sr. "He would go out on his bicycle when it was windy. The more wind, the better. If we heard a storm coming, we knew he was gone."

Faidley Jr. remembers the freedom he had as a child.

"You would go out to play in the morning and maybe show up for lunch and dinner," he said. "You'd

go into the desert to explore. There were moon landings and adventurers doing exciting things around the world in the 1960s. It was very inspiring."

After earning a degree in journalism from the University of Arizona, Faidley turned to photography as a career, working as a freelancer and then on staff with the Tucson Citizen for several years in the 1980s.

He wasn't a model employee. Far from it. He would often blow off assignments just to shoot the fires, floods and accidents that came over the police scanner.

"I didn't want to shoot the 'dog of the week,' " he said. "I didn't want to shoot the rodeo parade. That stuff would drive me insane."

In 1987, he went on his first tornado chase with fellow Citizen photographer A.T. "Tom" Willett.

The two had met at a trailer fire four years earlier. Willett was shooting for the Citizen at the time and Faidley was freelancing.

Tornado chasing was receiving national attention and they had talked about shooting one. When they heard about storms brewing near Saragosa, Texas, they hopped in Faidley's car and headed the 500 miles east.

"We had never seen anything like that storm before," Willett, 45, said. "We were both scared. It went across the entire horizon, solid lightning. I think it was probably the most incredible storm I have witnessed."

"The town was just completely gone when we got there," Faidley said. "There was very little you could distinguish that there was even a neighborhood, just piles of sticks and debris, mayhem. Just like you would see in the movies."

It wasn't until a year later that Faidley discovered he could make serious money from shooting weather.

He was photographing tanks at an oil refinery on Tucson's south side in 1988 when lightning struck a pole on the property, knocking the young photographer, nearly 400 feet away, off his feet.

Faidley escaped with cuts and bruises. What shocked him most was that he caught the event on film.

"I had it developed and literally almost passed out because I couldn't believe how perfect it was."

Life magazine paid him $500 for the picture and ran it a few months later with a cutline calling him a "storm chaser."

"The phone started ringing off the hook," he said. "There was nobody else covering weather as a photojournalist. Everybody started contacting me to shoot for them."

Hundreds of thousands of photos later, and Faidley is still at it, though he is much more organized these days.

During tornado season, you can find him driving around Kansas, Oklahoma, Nebraska and Texas in his Nissan Xterra — a vehicle he calls "The Archangel," retrofitted

with camera mounts, safety equipment and more gadgets and switches than the Batmobile.

The midsummer months put him back in Tucson, where he spends his evenings shooting the onslaught of spectacular storms and lightning shows.

Once hurricane season rolls around, Faidley is off to the Gulf of Mexico and Florida's Atlantic Coast, where he squeezes in extracurricular treasure hunts amid covering monster storms.

Faidley has photographed and filmed some of the most devastating hurricanes in the last two decades, including Gustav, Andrew and Ivan.

He went to Mobile, then Biloxi, Miss., when Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005.

"I knew everyone in the world would be in New Orleans," he said. "I also knew it was going to flood and that there would be limited opportunities. I figured the Gulf Coast was going to get hit hard. They were walloped."

Business

He offers his footage for sale on his Web site, **weatherstock.com**.

Faidley started his weather stock-footage company in 1989. His photos have appeared in everything from magazines to textbooks to billboards. Some of his images have sold for thousands of dollars.

A few seconds of good motion picture footage, which Faidley also shoots, can be worth up to $12,000, he said.

"When I bought my house in Tucson, they made me sign something saying I wasn't a drug dealer," he said. "They had never heard of somebody making money from shooting weather before."

Emmitt Smith has appeared in souvenir posters exploding from one of Faidley's tornados.

Another shot popped up in promotional materials for the 1996 film "Twister."

In 1993, one of Faidley's lightning photos appeared on the backstage passes for Paul McCartney's global "New World" tour.

"Linda McCartney looked through images for the passes and picked that one," Faidley said. "The weird

thing was that the shot was taken only three to four miles from their own place in Tucson."

Go-to weather guy

Faidley is often the go-to guy when CNN or Fox News need a weather expert. MSNBC dubbed him "America's Top Storm Chaser."

Last month, he served as the keynote speaker at the World Conference on Disaster Management in Toronto.

"There are a lot of people being faced with disasters, tsunamis, earthquakes, wildfires," said Chuck Wright, the group event director for the four-day conference. "Warren's background and extensive knowledge on what's left behind after such disasters, what we need

to prepare for in an emergency standpoint, is why we brought him up."

Despite his rise in reputation, Faidley says storm chasing isn't what it once was.

He used to see two or three storm chasers during tornado season. Now they line the roads by the hundreds.

"It is more about thrill-seeking these days," he said. "There is so much YouTube stuff now. It is more like skydiving or hang-gliding for a lot of these people."

In turn, the world of stock footage has also changed.

Digital cameras have allowed amateur photographers into the game, and the drastic increase of

images available has saturated the market. Faidley has had to change his tactics.

He relies a lot on film footage these days, which he says is always evolving.

Faidley has moved from one format to another shooting video. When high-definition came along, he loaded up on top-of-the-line HD equipment to keep ahead of the curve.

"I've been able to morph," Faidley said. "Things change every few years. In 10 years, something will replace HD and I will have to go out and shoot everything again."

He has put a lot of effort into public-speaking engagements; he's collaborated on multiple book

projects and has written two of his own.

He also offers specialized, one-on-one chases with high-end clientele for big bucks. Tours for 2010 listed on his Web site top out at $5,900. In Tucson, a $4,900 weeklong Monsoon Photo Safari Adventure — also scheduled for 2010 — includes trips to Biosphere 2 and the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum, in addition to evenings filled with monsoon-shooting activities.

Faidley has no plans to hang up his camera.

If he had a family, maybe. But he isn't married and never has been.

"I kind of gave up that part of my life," he said. "I've met people I could have been happy with and I totally blew it off because I was the

Indiana Jones, Capt. Kirk guy running around. I needed that freedom."

Storm chasing can be a solitary profession. But Faidley has been around long enough that he has no shortage of companions. The crew he runs with, a group he describes as a "very vagabond, gypsy community," includes a mix of students, journalists, seasoned hobbyists and meteorologists.

Joel Ewing, owner of Joel's Pottery in Tucson, has chased tornados with Warren for more than two decades.

The two met through a storm-chasing publication and join forces every year in Tornado Alley.

"Warren is a hilarious man, funnier than hell," said Ewing, 54. "He can be very difficult at times because he is a perfectionist. We've butted heads more than once. But we always end up shaking hands in the end."

"It is fun going out there, meeting people, having a beer and talking about what we've seen," Faidley said. "That is an attraction in itself. It is not always just about the storm."

Many of Faidley's friends, as well as much of his work, exist outside of Arizona. But Tucson's central location — a day's drive to Tornado Alley and mere hours from any Southern California wildfire — keeps him here.

Besides, he adds, "the lightning and the monsoon are still major draws for me."

More info on the Web

Find out more about Warren Faidley at storm **chaser.com** and **warrenfaidley.com**